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On being a Southerner

by [Barton Swaim](#)

On the “habits of affection and behavior” in the American South.

And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him. And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. . . . And he blessed him there.

—Genesis, Chapter 32: 24–26, 29

Two-thousand-eleven marked the 150th anniversary of the firing on Fort Sumter, the Battle of Bull Run, and the beginning of America's bloodiest war. In Charleston and in fields outside Manassas, Virginia, war re-enactors put on lavish displays of martial conflicts. Essays and articles on the War appeared in all the major newspapers, books on the conflict were widely reviewed, and PBS again ran Ken Burns's documentary series *The Civil War*, provoking at least one observer to express irritation that the Confederacy lends itself so easily to romantic portrayal. Once again (or so I imagine) people found themselves asking, perhaps with the red and blue map of Electoral College results in the back of their minds: Who are these Southerners? Are they the racists and political reactionaries we've always suspected them to be? Are they Americans in the deepest, most genuine sense, or is the South some aberration about which we ought to be embarrassed?

Jacques Barzun once remarked that Darwin's *Origin of the Species* is one of those books on which people have always felt free to discourse without having read it. That's true of the American South, too, and has been for a long time. “In the Southern states, gaming, fox hunting and horse-racing are the height of ambition; industry is reserved for slaves”: so wrote a twenty-six-year-old Noah Webster who had never been further south than New York. Exactly that sort of confident ignorance has long animated the American entertainment industry. Every Southerner has a favorite complaint: the apparent inability of film and television producers to find actual Southerners to play the part of Southerners; the routine association of the South with incest and abject stupidity; the location of all forms of bigotry in the South, even those for which Southerners aren't known; and of course the amazingly resilient idea that the Civil War was merely and exclusively about racism—a belief lampooned by Michael Scott (played by Steve Carell) in the television comedy “The Office.” Defending himself against imputations of racism, Michael remarks, “As Abraham Lincoln once said, ‘If you are a racist, I will invade you with the North.’”

Southerners themselves, or at least the writers and intellectuals among them, have long been preoccupied with defining Southern identity—often with results that confuse rather than clarify. Before the War, a number of influential Southern writers circulated the bogus notion that Southerners were descended from Cavaliers (mannerly, aristocratic, unmindful of money) and

Northerners from Puritans (earnest, plain in habits, inclined to moneymaking pursuits). After the War, a disparate variety of journalists, industrialists, and politicians promoted something they called the “New South,” a region that would foster economic and cultural vibrancy without giving in to the worship of Mammon (or, for some, to racial equality). It was against this latter collection of hopes and ideas that the Agrarian intellectuals reacted in *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. The twelve authors of that book—among them Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Frank Owsley— inveighed against the project, as they felt it to be, to make the South more like the North: more vulnerable to the cultural volatility and spiritual shallowness of an unregulated economy, more hospitable to radical individualism.

These attempts to define the nature of Southern society, whether the Old South, the New South, or something else, have defined the terms of the debate over Southernness since the Civil War. The trouble with them is that they have almost exclusively to do with social and political arrangements—there tend to be lots of “isms” in discussions of Southern identity—but little to do with Southerners themselves: why they are the way they are.

The first thing to say about the Southerner is almost a cliché: He hasn’t forgotten the War. Many people outside the South find Southerners’ obsession with the Civil War amusing, precious, or just off-putting. But in fact the vast majority of Southerners today don’t know a great deal about the War. Every Southerner, though—or every cognizant one—knows that the War was an eschatological event, a cataclysm that brought death and dishonor to the defeated. He may respond with blithe satisfaction that the right side won, or with defiance, or with ambivalence, or even with idiotic platitudes about how the War “wasn’t about slavery,” but about “states’ rights.” But eventually every literate Southerner comes to terms with the War.

The North had, broadly speaking, a good war. European demand for American grain skyrocketed just as the War began, and the need to clothe Federal troops created a boom in sheep farming and textile industries. Northern citizens experienced the war largely through newspaper reports, whereas Southern families heard the cannon fire and, toward the end, saw their homes and churches torched. The North lost more men—around 350,000 as against the South’s 260,000—but the South’s total population, white and black, was far smaller than the North’s. At the War’s outbreak in 1861, the Union could draw on 2.5 million men of military age; the South, fewer than a million.

The Civil War destroyed the South: its young male population, its economy, its infrastructure. But the most devastating thing about it wasn’t material but moral: since the spring of 1865, an acute moral opprobrium has attached to everything about the antebellum South. Even now, a century and a half after Appomattox, to express any favorable sentiment about the Old South, no matter how innocuously worded, is to risk one’s reputation.

Southerners, then, even Southerners who are only dimly aware of the War’s history, are nonetheless acutely aware of its effects. For the Southerner, as Faulkner famously said, “the past is never dead, it isn’t even past.” At the War’s centenary in 1961, Robert Penn Warren lamented many Southerners’ habit of blaming the South’s failings on the War, calling it the Great Alibi:

By the Great Alibi, pellagra, hookworm, and illiteracy are all explained, or explained away, and mortgages are converted into badges of distinction. Laziness becomes the aesthetic sense, blood-lust rising from a matrix of boredom and resentful misery becomes a high sense of honor, and ignorance becomes divine revelation.

“The Great Alibi,” he went on, “rusts away the will to confront those difficulties, at either a practical or an ethical level. All is explained—and transmuted.”

Fifty years later, the War no longer serves as much of an excuse for anything, but it still haunts the Southerner’s thoughts. The Old South had achieved the preponderance of its prosperity by acts of

theft, and every Southerner—even the most committed Southern apologist—feels the burden of guilt somewhere in his mind. Germans, at least, can look back on hundreds of years of German history that had nothing to do with Nazism. But for the Southerner, there was never a time before slavery, and thoughts about the past are always laden with regret.

But regret isn't enough. What's demanded of the Southerner by the prevailing culture (he feels) is that he loathe his past. There are no Confederate gravestones in the North, and if it were up to the cultural arbiters of the Northeast and West Coast, there would be none in the South either. The antebellum South, and even more so the South of the mid-twentieth century, have long served as convenient objects of hatred for those whose ideologies demand that they hate America's past.

Of course, the surest way to make a man revere his ancestors is to tell him again and again how odious those ancestors were. The constant reminders of the South's racist past—Has Hollywood ever produced a movie set in the South that had nothing to do with racial inequality?—serve mainly to keep the past uppermost in the Southerner's mind. It partially explains the South's political conservatism and its affinity with the country's "stupid party," such as it is. But it's as much attitudinal as political; you hear it in the devil-may-care political incorrectness of liberal Southern commentators, in the perverse fulminations of fundamentalist preachers, and in the defiant doggerel of Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama."

In Birmingham they love the gov'nor—
boo boo boo!
Now we all did what we could do.
Now Watergate does not bother me.
Does your conscience bother you?
Tell the truth.

Southerners like to complain about the way movies and television constantly link the South with doltishness and naïveté. Southern accents serve as shorthand for stupidity. A reference to a character's provenance in South Carolina or Mississippi (or just "the Deep South"—for the entertainment industry the term is just an intensified form of "the South") signifies an inability to read or perform basic exercises in logic.

There's truth behind the caricature, though, even if it's not the truth imagined by the lazy script-writers. As a class, Southerners have never tended toward bookishness or placed a high value on formal education in the way other Americans have. It may be true that the antebellum South was not the cultural wilderness of popular lore: there were more colleges in the Old South than in the North, and a higher proportion of the South's white population attended college than was the case in the North. But those kinds of statistics can mislead; more revealing is the fact that, in 1860, only 35 percent of Southern children attended school, whereas 72 percent of non-Southern children did so.

Intellectuals have always and everywhere complained that they're paid insufficient attention, but with Southern authors you feel the force of conviction. "The South don't care a damn for literature or art," wrote the South Carolinian William Gilmore Simms in 1847.

Your neighbor & kindred never think to buy books. They will borrow from you & beg but the same man who will always have his wine, has no idea of a library. . . . In the North, the usual gift to a young lady is a book—in the South, a ring, a chain, or a bottle of Eau de Cologne.

Allowing for Simms's injured pride, not much has changed. What lay behind his complaint is that the Southern moral outlook was (and is) rooted in customs rather than ideas, and in loyalties rather than principles. The Southerner, to speak in the most general sense, lives by what Michael Oakeshott called a "habit of affection and behavior." In his marvelous essay "The Tower of Babel,"

originally published in 1948, he defines two types of moral life, one defined by habit, the other by reflection. The reflective moral life, the one the vast majority of Americans are taught to admire, involves the self-conscious expression and observance of abstract moral rules. In the moral life as a habit of affection and behavior, by contrast,

conduct is as nearly as possible without reflection. And consequently, most of the current situations of life do not appear as occasions calling for judgment, or as problems requiring solutions; there is no weighing up of alternatives, or reflection on consequences, no uncertainty, no battle of scruples. There is, on the occasion, nothing more than the unreflective following of a tradition of conduct in which we have been brought up. And such moral habit will disclose itself as often in *not* doing, in the taste which dictates abstention from certain actions, as in performances.

There is, of course, no society in which the moral life is completely unreflective or completely reflective; the point here is that the South is and always has been a place where personal decisions and societal arrangements are more often the products of immemorial usage and habit than they are of reflection and self-conscious adherence to precepts. The chief reason for this isn't a complicated one: namely that the South began as a rural and agricultural society, and rural and agricultural societies are made up of people who don't derive their opinions and beliefs from books full of abstract principles.

Here we touch on a paradox. Southern society, or at least Southern society of a half-century ago, was a place governed by a kind of cultural inertia. Change did not come often or easily, and the relations obtaining between man and man, though stratified in ways unpardonable to many outside the South, involved mutual responsibility rather than material wealth. Yet, for the last forty years, it's been the South, not the North or the Midwest or even the West Coast, where that set of principles variously known as free market economics, *laissez-faire*, and "capitalism" have received their warmest reception—the very principles that, once unloosed in a society (so the thinking goes), tend to uproot and destroy traditional ways of life.

Today's South is hardly a pure specimen of economic liberalization, to be sure—Southern states, like all others, are incessant meddlers in economic affairs, often in the name of "economic development"—but the states of the Confederacy are now, by comparison with the rest of the nation, broadly more open to economic freedom and private enterprise of every kind. The fact that this openness is real, and not just a form of political rhetoric, is plain from the data. Foreign and domestic capital investments are increasingly tending southward, and the South's labor force is exploding almost as fast as the North's is shrinking. The paradox is exemplified in today's U.S. Congress: by far the most effective spokesmen for free market economic policies are Southerners who also defend traditional morality with an intensity their colleagues find bizarre.

The Agrarian intellectuals saw it all coming. They admitted the Old South had to change in fundamental ways (even if their admissions sounded insufficiently heartfelt even by the standards of their own day). But they denounced the ascendancy of corporate industrialism and moral individualism that slowly took the place of the old way of life. Eugene Genovese, the eminent historian of slavery in the Old South, sums up their critique in his brilliant (though to my mind misguided) book *The Southern Tradition* (1994). "Southern conservatism," he writes—by that term he means the conservatism propounded by Southern Agrarian intellectuals such as Tate, Ransom, Warren, Donald Davidson, and M. E. Bradford—

has always traced the evils of the modern world to the ascendancy of the profit motive and material acquisitiveness; to the conversion of small property based on individual labor into accumulated capital manifested as financial assets; to the centralization and bureaucratization of management; to the extreme specialization of labor and the rise of

consumerism; to an idolatrous cult of economic growth and scientific and technological progress; and to the destructive exploitation of nature.

In that respect, at least, the Southern Agrarian intellectuals resembled the intellectual leaders of the Old South who had denounced the “free-labor system” as “wage-slavery.”

Genovese, as is well known, was for many years a Marxist before turning dramatically toward a form of traditionalist conservatism. But his abandonment of Marxism (one gathers) was reluctant rather than decisive, and his embrace of Southern conservatism has more than a hint of dialectic about it. This he has in common with the Southern intellectuals he admires. They were not Marxists, but they were educated in an era when literate people accepted the Marxist assumptions embodied in the word “capitalism”: the belief that the industrialization and social instability created by liberal economies were the results of a system, a particular arrangement of societal institutions.

“Capitalism,” Genovese goes on to say, “has historically been the greatest solvent of traditional relations.” But “capitalism,” to the extent such a thing exists outside political theory, isn’t some defective social order that always moves in a certain direction or yields certain results. It is, rather, the way humans naturally arrange themselves when allowed to do so by a government that protects them from molestation. “Capitalism,” in other words, is just a highfalutin’ word for political freedom.

In that light, the South’s alignment with *laissez-faire* economics may be paradoxical or even self-contradictory, but it is not mysterious. The free market is ungoverned, or governed as little as feasible, by the principles of thoughtful planners. Economic activity thrives best in the absence of, to use Oakeshott’s language, self-conscious attempts so formulate and abide by abstract codes. The profit motive is instinctive, not reflective; it spurs imagination, not introspection; the desire to build a better mouse trap does not arise from the sad reflection that the mouse traps currently available leave much to be desired, but from the desire to make money. By contrast, government interventions in economic affairs spring from a disposition of self-criticism and dissatisfaction with the way things are: new forms of taxation, new regulations, and new labor laws, for example, are dreamed up by highly educated people who feel they know the right way to create the best conditions for everyone.

The Southern intellectuals had a point in their objections to “capitalism.” The dangers they saw were not products of some “ism” but merely of prosperity. It’s material wealth itself, not the societal arrangement that enables its creation, that eventually undermines traditional social relations. If there had to be a Southern critique of American culture, this should have been it: that once a people begins to ignore all goals but the attainment of prosperity, it ensures its own decline. To the extent that prosperity encourages one to understand other human beings as mere instruments, interesting only insofar as they can gratify one’s material longings, it encourages a moral outlook not much different from that of a slave trader.

This isn’t an original point. It’s made repeatedly in the books of the Old Testament. “Beware,” says Deuteronomy chapter eight, “that thou forget not the Lord thy God, in not keeping his commandments, and his judgments, and his statutes, which I command thee this day: Lest when thou hast eaten and art full, and hast built goodly houses, and dwelt therein; And when thy herds and thy flocks multiply, and thy silver and thy gold is multiplied, and all that thou hast is multiplied; Then thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the Lord thy God, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.” And, indeed, if Southerners appreciate the perils of Mammon-worship more fully than others do (as I think is possible), it has at least something to do with the fact that God is such a massive and imminent presence in Southern life. It’s rather because God is such a massive and immanent a presence in Southern life.

If God is there at all—even if he’s only up there somewhere looking down—it follows that status,

power, and material possessions may be far less important than one might have thought. But for the Southerner, God isn't some nameless deity, prepared to intervene at crisis points but otherwise uninvolved; he is a character of ordinary life, as present and real as a cousin or friend. Even today, when secularization has almost run its course in most of the rest of the country, the typical Southerner speaks of God as though he had been physically in the room only a minute ago.

"The South is by a long way the most simply and sincerely religious country that I was ever in," wrote the Scottish writer William Archer (himself an atheist) in 1910. "It is not, like Ireland, a priest-ridden country; it is not, like England, a country in which the strength of religion lies in its social prestige; it is not, like Scotland, a country steeped in theology. But it is a country in which religion is a very large factor in life, and God is very real and personal." What's striking about this passage is how, a century later, Ireland is no longer priest-ridden, no social prestige attaches to the Established (or any other) Church in England, and Scotland has completely rejected its theological inheritance. Yet for many Southerners, perhaps most, God is as imposingly present as he was in 1910.

This appalls and frightens non-Southerners, especially academics, members of the news media, and Europeans, who blame the South's aboriginal religious attachments and "biblical literalism" for its backwardness and racial bigotry. Leave aside the fact that much of the last half-century's racial violence has occurred outside the South—without Christianity, without the intense forms of religious devotion for which Southerners are known, Southern racism would be far worse than it has been. The South's traversal, in the space of roughly 120 years, from race-based slave ownership to peaceful racial coexistence is nothing less than miraculous. Of course, a certain kind of intellectual will prefer to credit that miraculous traversal solely to external intervention; for my part it's sufficient to have witnessed Southern whites struggle with their own inclinations for no other reason than that they had come to believe, in their minds if not yet fully in their hearts, that Jesus died for blacks, too.

Racial hatred is still a part of Southern life, to be sure. I have a vivid memory of sitting down to eat my lunch in the breakroom of a supermarket (I had just gotten a job there bagging groceries) and reading Martin Luther's treatise *Bondage of the Will*. "Whatcha reading?" a woman asked. I showed her the book. "Well," she said, "I think they should ship all the niggers back to Africa." I sat stunned for some time before I realized her mistake. Yet people my age (I was born in 1972) have experienced little of this kind of thing, and that, from all I've been able to discern, holds true for most blacks of my age and younger. The stories of racism we've read about in the news, from Marge Schott to Michael Richards, have come from elsewhere. It's true that the populist fixations of the post-Reconstruction South borrowed and, as I would say, perverted the symbols of Christianity. But these movements had far more to do with economic grievances than with religion. Christianity, for the Klan, was a prop.

The ruin visited on the South's white and black population had the effect of bringing white and black religious visions closer together—whites could now identify with ruined, exiled Israelites just as readily as blacks had always done. The point is made beautifully in one of Flannery O'Connor's best stories, "Revelation," a story I take to be an allegory of the South's experience of the War and its aftereffects. Ruby Turpin, a proud and self-satisfied woman, sits in a doctor's office and carries on a polite conversation with another lady, whose noticeably ugly daughter sits glumly reading a college textbook. The girl is a student at Wellesley, presumably home for the summer. Ruby speaks condescendingly of those she considers beneath her, namely blacks and white trash. Visibly outraged, the ugly college student hurls her textbook at Ruby, gashing her face (the book is called *Human Development*), and lunges at her throat. After she's been subdued, the girl turns to Ruby and calmly says, "Go back to where you came from, you old warthog."

Clearly the girl was deranged, and yet Ruby can't forget that she'd called *her* a warthog. Later that

night, feeding the hogs on her farm, in some sense finally identifying with real hogs, Ruby has a vision. She sees a highway in the sky, and on the highway are multitudes bound for heaven:

Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as people who, like herself and Claud [her husband], had always had a little of everything and the God-given sense to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.

That last reference is to 1 Corinthians 3:12–15 in which the Apostle Paul writes, “the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is . . . If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.” Ruby Turpin is the South; the Wellesley student, crazed with her own moral superiority, is the North. Ruby is shocked and dumbfounded by her attacker’s brutality, but it is only through that brutality that she begins to understand that, in God’s presence, your whiteness and respectability and hardworking ways won’t amount to a thing.

It’s the South’s enduring attachment to Biblical Christianity, too, that accounts for the region’s well-known American patriotism. A 2008 study by the Heritage Foundation, “Who Serves in the U.S. Military?,” found that a full 42 percent of the nation’s recruits are from the South—a substantial overrepresentation. On the face of it, that statistic is one side of a paradox: the South tried to secede from the Union, not the other way around, yet a century-and-a-half later Southerners are quicker than Northerners to join the union’s military. The Heritage report notes only that the overrepresentation is “in line with the history of Southern military tradition.” That may be true, but what accounts for the South’s military tradition? Call it superstition or something else.

G. K. Chesterton comes close to the truth in chapter seven of *The Everlasting Man*, “The War of the Gods and Demons,” a delightful demolition of H. G. Wells’s notion that history can be explained by purely material causes and effects. Chesterton points out that while governments may go to war to achieve material ends, men don’t fight to the death for their governments’ economic or political advantage. They fight to the death because they love their homeland enough to defend it from evil. In a Christ-haunted landscape, as O’Connor famously called the South, some things will always be worth dying for.

The Southern Agrarian intellectuals worried that the South would lose its distinctiveness and become, literally, a poor imitation of the North. Some of their fears were well founded: rural life has dwindled almost to the point of non-existence; agriculture has mostly been arrogated by faraway corporations; obesity, a consequence of industrialized food, has spread like a disease among the South’s poor. But for all its backwardness and poverty, the South leads in ways undreamed of by even the most sanguine early-twentieth-century proponents of the New South. Southern colleges and universities have risen in prestige even as the venerable schools of the Northeast have begun to collapse into moral confusion. The popularity of NASCAR and country music are only the most superficial instances of the way in which Southern life is now a sought-after commodity. For well over a decade the Southern economy has grown faster than the nation’s other regions. And for all the hostility with which the nation’s overeducated elite view Southern religion, Southern values pervade American culture and politics; think, for example, of how different presidential elections would be without the South.

Almost everything that’s still distinctive about the American South is a more or less direct

consequence of the War. The South would have developed into something entirely different, and worse, had war never come, or if the Confederacy had achieved its independence. Indeed, I sometimes think the South won the War—not by defeating its enemy on the battlefield but, as Jacob did, by refusing to yield until a blessing had been extracted. It was a high price to pay. Jacob was crippled by the experience, and the South will walk with a limp forever. “And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved. And as he passed over Penuel the sun rose upon him, and he halted upon his thigh.”

Barton Swaim is the author of *Scottish Men of Letters and the New Public Sphere*.

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